

# **FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET**

**Meeting Date:** April 19, 2018

**Agenda Item:** Mount Haggin Wildlife Management Area Habitat Project #4 (R3)

**Division:** Wildlife

**Action Needed:** Final

**Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 10 Minutes

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## **Background**

The Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) is proposing to treat conifer expansion on approximately 1,500 acres of primarily grassland and shrubland habitats on the Mt. Haggin Wildlife Management Area (WMA). The total gross project area is 6,600 acres delineated into six treatment units, ranging in size from 65 to 646 acres. Conifers would be removed from grasslands, sagebrush, aspen, and willow-dominated riparian areas. This would mainly be a non-commercial harvest with a small component of commercial harvest of merchantable timber removed from aspen stands. Treatment in non-commercial areas would include hand-removal methods, with slash being either lopped and scattered or piled and burned. Commercial harvest would include the use of heavy machinery and temporary skid trails. No new roads would be established.

Mt. Haggin WMA was purchased in 1976 for its wildlife habitat values. Because of its large intact acreage (almost 60,000 acres) that spans the Continental Divide, it provides summer and winter range to several big game species including mule deer, elk, moose, and antelope. Photo comparisons from the 1970's to 2010's show a large amount of conifer expansion into sagebrush, grasslands, aspen and riparian areas on the WMA. If left unchecked, conifer expansion could impact the big game populations that depend on Mt Haggin WMA for calving/fawning, summer weight gain, and winter survival. This project would also benefit other wildlife species that rely on these habitats including songbirds and small mammals. This proposal would ensure critical habitats remain functional and productive into the next 50 years.

## **Public Involvement Process & Results**

FWP completed an Environmental Assessment (EA) for the proposed project, which was released for a 30-day public comment period on November 3, 2017. The public was notified that this EA was available for review and comment as follows:

- Direct mailing to adjacent landowners, Deer Lodge County, Silver Bow County, BLM, Forest Service, and other interested parties
- Distribution via the FWP Butte Area Wildlife Biologist's email list of interested parties
- Two public notices each in *Montana Standard* (Butte) and *Anaconda Leader* (Anaconda).
  - Public notice on the FWP web page: <http://fwp.mt.gov>.

Copies of the draft EA were available for public review at FWP Region 3 Headquarters and at the FWP Butte Area Resource Office. Six comments were received on this proposal. All were in support of the proposed action, with some suggestions to improve the project. Many of these were incorporated into the final decision.

## **Alternatives and Analysis**

Two alternatives were evaluated:

1. FWP would proceed as proposed.
2. FWP would not implement any conifer removal projects on the WMA. A lack of treatment would allow the affected habitats to continue to decline in productivity.

## **Agency Recommendation & Rationale**

FWP recommends the commission approve this project to remove Douglas fir and lodgepole pine from 1,500 acres of habitat on Mt. Haggin WMA, primarily to maintain and improve wildlife habitat productivity.

**Proposed Motion:** I move the Fish and Wildlife Commission approve the Mt. Haggin Wildlife Management Area Habitat Project #4 as proposed by the department.